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ABSTRACT

In "Management and the Activity Trap," George S. Odiorne points out that many organizations become so enmeshed in activity that they lose sight of their goals and the activity becomes an end in itself. This paper applies Odiorne's description of the activity trap to modern English departments. It points to examples that indicate that English departments unquestioningly continue all their activities from past years, lack clarity about their objectives, and lose sight of their overall purposes. The paper then presents Odiorne's list of six methods used by organizations to distort facts and applies them to the circumstances of many English departments. Finally, the paper lists Odiorne's suggestions for organizations that want to get out of the activity trap and proposes that English departments attempt to follow the suggestions in seeking alternatives to their present situations. (GW)

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The English Department and the "Activity Trap"

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In these times of decreasing or at best a slowed growth in student enrollment in universities, epidemic illiteracy, and intense competition for the few collegial jobs and tenure appointments for English instructors, one must expect some surprise or even suspicion to claim that the problem may be that English departments in particular and academic institutions in general may be doing too much. But the systemic ailment common to many forms of modern organizations which George S. Odiorne has labelled "The Activity Trap" may well be afflicting colleges and universities. Moreover, the attendant problems which the trap produces and some solutions suggested by Odiorne in his book, Management and the Activity Trap (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), deserve our attention as both teachers and scholars.

Briefly, the activity trap is described by Odiorne as he examines what makes institutions and its managers, its professionals, successful. One of his observations is that "In the best-run corporations more people are clear as to their objectives than in less-run, less successful organizations" (Odiorne, p. 9). Conversely, those people and organizations which are less successful tend to be caught in the activity trap, i.e., "They become so enmeshed in activity they lose sight of why they are doing it, and the activity becomes a false goal, an end in itself. Successful people never lose sight of their goals, the hoped-for outputs" (Odiorne, p. 6). In a business organization, for example, production people behave "as if 'getting

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the goods out the back door' were the reason for the company's existence; yet the product has defects in quality, is produced at the wrong time, in the wrong model, in short or long quantities, and costs more and more" (Odiorne, p. 10). With some refinement, the training of English PhD's resembles this "trap" where somehow the doctoral program is perceived as the heart of the English department's vitality and status, as well as the health and effectiveness of its faculty, but PhD's are generated with inappropriate skills to meet the needs of students or business, PhD programs cost more and more to maintain, and the dissertation process often runs counter to the true interests or motives of the candidate or the original goals of graduate education in the liberal arts.

The specialized sense of purpose, of importance, which characterizes organizations caught in the activity trap can best be seen in the struggles for power--for staff positions, for funding of special programs, for the creation or retention of requirements--which can permeate any modern English department. Specialty groups within any department perceive themselves as crucial, as central to the functioning of the department. My own test of this situation is what I have named the "trimming tendency" when a department is faced with an austerity budget as we have been over the past few years at Wayne State University. When funds are limited, the likelihood that entire activities of a department will be abandoned is very slim; instead, programs, course offerings in the Renaissance, masters course offerings, writing courses, are diminished in number, or increased in student size, but rarely will a department or its members acknowledge that its courses may be obsolete, its courses or programs repetitive, and choose to <u>stop doing</u> something it has always <u>done</u>, whether that be teaching Milton or offering the PhD. The

"trimming tendency" suggests to me that the English department considers all of its activities vital, important, and worthy of sustaining, even though the most difficult of times may mean drastic cuts in staffing or structure so as to render those activities virtually ineffectual as related to department or college goals. Of course, this sense of significance is not limited to English departments but is part of a university wide system of specialized activity traps called Departments which impose, as David Reisman has described, "protective tariffs between academic divisions" ("The Search for Alternative Models in Education," American Scholar, Summer 1969).

Another important aspect of Odiorne's description of the activity trap concerns the lack of clarity among organization members as to their objectives. Perhaps because the objectives of English departments are so complex that members willingly ignore them, or because objectives are so muddy that attempts to fulfill them are necessarily also muddy, but in any case the results are similar. People serve on examining committees for graduate examinations, theses, and dissertations without ever knowing (or sometimes even caring) about the graduate student's plan of work, occupational objectives, or the department's standards for evaluations. People teach new courses without ever asking about or being informed about the course's objectives or how they contribute to the goals of the department's programs or the university's requirements or the student's occupational plans. Junior faculty prepare a dossier for tenure considerations without being fully aware of the goals or standards for evaluation (if in fact they do exist).

The combined effects of persistent activity among specialists, "a generation of people who have learned to become emotionally attached to irrelevancies" (Odiorne, p. 7) and uncertainty about objectives not only obstruct the organization's goals from being achieved, but can actually

prevent their success, as Odiorne notes: "The lamentable outcome of the activity trap . . . is that the purposes of the firm are subverted. The question 'What are we in business for?' gets asked infrequently and accordingly is not answered as often or as successfully" (Odiorne, p. 13). I suspect this question is rarely asked when people are hired or fired, when new courses are proposed, when activities or staff are evaluated, when departmental or university requirements are proposed or challenged.

Odiorne suggests an exercise that can be adapted to any set of "superiors" and "subordinates" (read: Administration and faculty) to detect the connection between the activity trap and goal dispersions. Odiorne posits that "left to their own devices, chances are high that both /superior and subordinate/ have become so busily engaged in activity that they have lost sight of the purposes of much of this activity" (Odiorne, p. 28). Odiorne would ask the superior to make a list of the major responsibilities of the subordinate and to define the desired results in each area of designated responsibility. Then Odiorne asks the subordinate to likewise describe his job in answer to the following question: "What are your major areas of responsibility, and in each area of responsibility what results or outputs do you think the boss expects?" (Odiorne, p. 28). The answers, claims Odiorne, will differ significantly. Boss and subordinate will fail to agree at a level of 25 percent on regular, recurring responsibilities. In turn, disagreement as to what major problems exist and need remedy rises to 50 percent. Finally and most seriously, boss and subordinate will fail to agree at a level of 90 percent as to what needs changing, improving, or modifying (Odiorne, p. 28). A striking example of great disparity between subordinate and superior in this third area occurred recently at Wayne

State when the Board of Governors decided to dismember Monteith College, a small but important contributor to academic excellence and pedagogic performance at the university and to the study of arts and sciences generally.

Although the activity trap originates at the top of the organization (Odiorne, p. 39), its solution often depends on the accuracy and completeness of information and advice that is received from its members. But the state of things may never be disclosed to administration or may be reported inaccurately because in an activity-trap organization, facts may often go into hiding. Odiorne identifies at least six ways that facts can be concealed in an organization, all of which (and their numerous variations) can be applied to the circumstances of many English departments. A brief description of some of these methods and their possible occurrences in academic institutions follows:

(1) The Chicken Little Fallacy--leaping from a fact to a conclusion.

It may be true that "where there's smoke, there's fire," but reporting a whiff of smoke as the new Chicago fire may cause administrators or other decision-makers to make hasty and exaggerated decisions. When, for example, a dropping enrollment rate or increasing failure rate on a writing proficiency exam is seized upon as a "fact," with alarming implications, all sorts of new courses or new requirements may be instituted without merit or reason.

(2) Reversible Evidence, or the Rear-view fact--citing an event after the alleged fact to prove the existence of the fact.

The "fact" that students do not write or read as well as they used to is explained by the philosophical changes in

teaching which accompanied political sentiments in the early 1960's. Thus "long-haired hippie freaks" are responsible for comma splices, non-standard dialect, and fragmentary thought-speech patterns.

(3) Irrelevant evidence, or here's the answer, what's the question--use of rationality to confound or deny reality.

Since the college degree as insurance for economic and social mobility is now being questioned, we can thus explain the decrease in number of English Majors. Or, television is responsible for a student's lack of interest, laziness, lack of imagination, lack of verbal skills, inattentiveness, etc., etc. . . .

(4) Ghost proof--establish an affirmative fact by means of negative evidence.

A program or course may be evaluated and no positive evidence can be found of its effectiveness or contributions to the department's growth, thus the evaluation committee recommends that the program or course be discontinued. Or, a faculty member is dismissed because little evidence of his/her direct contributions to the department is known.

(5) The Hot-Potato Proof (buck passing)--placing the burden of proof or disproof on others, usually the listener/reader.

The academic market is glutted with PhD's because of economic problems which make it impossible for colleges and universities to absorb them. The legislators, not the academic departments, are responsible for too many job-hunters

> and not enough jobs. If you don't believe that's the reason, prove it isn't! (Odiorne, pp. 104-12)

What these fallacies suggest is that before faculty can effectively recommend change to chairmen, deans, presidents, boards of trustees, it must thoroughly and objectively determine what problems exist and what situations or facts are causing the events. If faculty remain content with chicken little answers and preservation of their species as a false goal, then they can expect the results which accompany an activity-trap organization, namely, "In the long run, the good people who work in such an organization shrink" (Odiorne, pp. 27-28). Odiorne supplies some analogies for this shrinking effect on morale and motivation of the organization's members:

> It's like running in a race with none of the contestants knowing how long it is to be. They can only wonder if it is time to sprint for the wire--it may be a hundred yard dash or it may be the Boston Marathon. It's like being hit by a falling tree, after which the axe man leans over your broken body to whisper TIMBER! (Odiorne, p. 29)

But a recently disappointed tenure candidate at my university found his own appropriate analogy in a Stein quote: "When you get there there's no there there."

Those organizations which intend to escape the activity trap must first define the long-run strategic goals of the organization. Naturally, such exploration must begin and continue at the highest levels of administration, but we in English departments can follow Odiorne's advice as it applies to activity traps within our own faculties, interest groups, and committees. Odiorne identifies the four major questions which "comprise the strategic points for goals-setting and results-centered management systems in the most respected of the money tree companies":

(1) Where are we now?--the answer to which involves statistical and judgmental statements;
(2) What trends are discernible?--keeping in mind "Odiorne's Law: Things that do not change will remain the same";
(3) What are our new objectives?--failure to ask "what are we in business for?" may lead to extinction, warns Odiorne; and pride (otherwise known as the great tradition, the ivory tower, etc.) is indeed a liability to answering this question;
(4) What are our options? It is this question which offers the way out of the activity trap: "The listing of alternatives, including a few which provide some surprises, are where the innovative skills break through the activity trap. The activity trap proposes but one option: 'Do nothing new'.... The surprise option is the best evidence that the activity trap has not achieved a death grip on the organization. It is an indication that people are still able to think the unthinkable once in awhile" (Odiorne, pp. 153-155).

In conclusion, I propose that English faculties "think some unthinkable thoughts" regularly, communally, seriously. We might start with such "alternatives" as abandoning the PhD at numerous universities, re-appraising the tenure system and its implied connection with academic freedom, re-organizing academic study in ways other than those that require a student who wishes to find more than one set of answers to take a course "out" of his "discipline" or major, challenging the notion that liberal arts education and "vocational" preparations are different, for instance. Through seeking new alternatives that will even surprise ourselves we can reverse Odiorne's description of an activity-trap organization in our own colleges and universities, so that doing things right will not be more important than doing the right things.